

revised script,
containing all cuts and
rewrites made up
through Dec. 1987

These cuts and rewrites
occur in the dialogue
on pages 5

THE RESPONSES

A Play

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David Cole

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stage directions on these
or other pages, were made
only for purposes of partic-
ular staged readings
and should be disregarded.

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NOTE

The closing of the Talmud (c. 600 A.D.) left many questions of doctrine, ritual and law still unsettled. Thus in every subsequent era famous rabbinical authorities have found themselves besieged by requests --sometimes from half a world away--for rulings on borderline cases, new developments, etc. These letters of inquiry, together with the rabbis' answers (responsa; Hebrew tishuvot) to them, constitute an immense library of spiritual case-law: the responsa-literature--international in scope, encyclopedic in range, and continuous from the early Middle Ages to the present day.

Characters

The RABBI

The SCRIBE

The COURIER

Scene: The Rabbi's study

(The RABBI's study. The RABBI and his SCRIBE at work.

The SCRIBE is seated on a high stool at a spindly, slant-topped clerk's desk. From a peg on the side of the desk hangs a battered leather mail pouch. At rise, the SCRIBE is writing with a quill pen in a small parchment scroll on the desk out before him.

The RABBI sits in a throne-like armchair. His gaze is fixed far away out over the heads of the audience. He is engaged in performing, over and over again, the following obsessive ^{The Searching Hand Gesture:} movement-pattern, hereafter referred to as ~~the Searching Hand Gesture~~.

With fingers and palm held stiffly upright, the RABBI sends his left hand out through a series of endless corner-turning movements in air. That is, the hand (itself always rigidly vertical) will glide along horizontally for a while; then make a sharp, right-angle turn upward or downward into vertical motion; then presently "turn another corner" in air --and find itself moving on the horizontal once more ...etc. This movement-pattern, while always more or less the same physically, seems to be different gestures at different moments: now brushing away cobwebs, now parting curtains, now a kind of "dowsing," now the bestowal of a benediction, now a neurotic tic, etc. The RABBI keeps this ^{"searching hand gesture"} ~~gesture~~ going pretty much continuously ~~throughout~~ the play. But it comes into prominence especially at those moments when he is pondering the answer to a query which the SCRIBE has just read out to him. Then, it is as if the RABBI were allowing his hand to range over some immensely complex system of niches--"32 up, 187 out from the body, 14 to the right," etc.--somewhere within which the reply to this or any possible question is to be found.

With a flourish of his quill, the SCRIBE finishes writing in the scroll out before him, rolls it shut, and drops it into the pouch hanging off the side of his desk.

Enter the COURIER. He is rather dashingy dressed: fringed boots, swirling cape, raffish plumed hat, etc. His costume, however, is absolutely filthy--caked through with dried mud from sole to crown. Moreover, he seems weighed down by the battered leather mail pouch he carries--a twin to the one that hangs off the side of the SCRIBE's desk.

The COURIER empties out onto the desktop the contents of his pouch: scrolls of all sizes and descriptions, some tied with ribbons, some sealed with wax. He then straightens up to enjoy a moment of release.

~~SEARCHING HAND GESTURE~~

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be

of release. The SCRIBE lifts the other pouch off its peg on the side of the desk and holds it out to the COURIER. COURIER and SCRIBE exchange pouches. The SCRIBE hangs up the emptied-out pouch which he has received from the COURIER on the desk peg. The COURIER shoulders the (filled) pouch which the SCRIBE has handed him and staggers off under what, again, appears to be a crushing weight.

The SCRIBE undoes one of the scrolls on his desk and scans it hurriedly.

For each of the many questions read out by the SCRIBE and answered by the RABBI in the course of the play, the business is approximately the same:

1. The SCRIBE opens a scroll and reads aloud the question it contains.
2. The RABBI "searches" the air, in the manner described above, for an answer (responsum) to the question.
3. His answer once found, the RABBI delivers it aloud to the SCRIBE, who simultaneously transcribes the RABBI's words onto the edges, bottom or obverse of the same scroll from which he has read the question.
4. The SCRIBE then rolls this scroll shut, drops it into the pouch, and takes up another scroll.

Even late in the play, when the RABBI's answers have ceased to bear much relation to the questions put to him, (so that there is little if anything to set down), the SCRIBE attempts to maintain at least the skeleton of this procedure.)

The SCRIBE now reads from the scroll he has just opened.)

SCRIBE

~~(reading from the scroll he has just opened)~~

From Rabbi Solomon Ibn Adret, known as RAMBAM, Saragossa, Spain:

O thou in whom our saints and sages once again speak, may I add one more to the swirl of voices that break on thy peace? Long I prayed to behold a vision of the prophet Elijah, borne in upon his throne of flames. At length the heavens opened --but all I saw was an unoccupied chaire from which proceeded unintelligible words. If the Holy One was not disposed to grant --so!; but why is he pleased thus to mock--at this, my heartfelt desire?

RABBI

But, you have had your desire! You besought a prophet to appear to a man of our time. How else is a prophet ever going to appear to a man of our time but as a voice unheeded issuing from a place unfilled?

SCRIBE

~~(opens another scroll and reads:)~~

From Rabbi Ezekiel Landau of Prague:

Master, in great perplexity we turn. Rashi teaches that amulets intended to bar the entry of evil spirits from a house must be horizontally affixed to the door-frame. His pupil, Zalman of St. Goar, on the other hand, holds that these talismans are most effective when vertically attached. What is your position in this matter?

RABBI

I am for compounding the wisdom of two great men: Let the amulets go up at a slant.

SCRIBE

~~(opens another scroll and reads:)~~

From Rabbi Simeon Duran, known as RASHBA, Algiers, North Africa:
O thou dweller in the Tents of the Law! Is a man required to do penance for a Sabbath-violation committed in a dream?

RABBI

It will suffice if he... dream a penance.

SCRIBE

~~(opens another scroll and reads:)~~

From Aristaeus ben Hyrcan, Chief Rabbi of the East Roman Empire:
Proconsul of the Province of Truth! According to Tractate Zebahim, the Angels understand Biblical Hebrew, Chaldee and some Aramaic--but not a word of Greek. Now suppose the Almighty were minded to dispatch an angelic messenger to one ignorant of every tongue save--

RABBI

Is it too much to suppose that He who can send an angel can also send an increase in linguistic facility? However, there is no need to rest content with my teaching in this matter. The question should be put to the very next angel to present himself--in rapidfire, colloquial Greek.

SCRIBE

~~(opens another scroll and reads:)~~

From Rabbi Judah Grünwald, Sotmar, Hungary:

Light of the Exile! Talmud specifies that graves are to be laid out in such fashion that at the resurrection, the dead will arise and face Jerusalem. However, starting from our corner of Hungary, it is possible to reach Jerusalem by either of two distinct routes: due east through Constantinople, or southward along the upper rim of--

RABBI

Is it all questions, as far as the eye can see?

~~(The SCRIBE looks up, startled.)~~

Sift through! See if you cannot dredge me up one that begins: "Eleanora and the babes are well," or "The autumn finds you, as always, much in my thoughts"....

~~(The SCRIBE rummages through the scrolls on the desk before him.)~~

How casual his search! When you have sat as long as I among the Respondents, you will know a keener hunger for the letter-in-a-thousand that has nothing it wants to know.

~~(The SCRIBE, having completed his search, looks up apologetically.)~~

All roads lead to Jerusalem. Let your gravediggers be guided by the exigencies of soil and site.

SCRIBE

~~(opens another scroll and reads:)~~

From Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra, known as RABBAFZ, Safed, in the Holy Land:

Master, in great perplexity we turn. It is written: "Approaching a village where the majority of the inhabitants are Jewish, one pronounces a blessing. If, however, the majority are gentiles, one does not pronounce a blessing." The question now arises: what does one do in a case where the population is evenly divided?

RABBI

One then... pronounces the blessing with a divided heart.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Mordecai Schwadron of Berzun in Galicia:

Voice of the voices! Mishnan forbids construction of a Succah-booth underneath the roof of a house or even where a tree or clothesline o'erspreadeth, as it is written: "From shadow free, thy tents." Now suppose as a man labors upon his Succah-booth, he happens to notice a shorebird with outstretched wing circling and circling the site where he builds--

RABBI

"With her face toward the gallows." "The flesh of the hind-paw."
"Seven winters at least."

(The SCRIBE looks up, puzzled.)

Some answers. Some truths as some answers. Not, perhaps, appearing to you to bear on the question--yet set them down! Questions will be along on which they bear. No question but does not at the last come straggling in here.... Oh, there is something about this filing by, truth on the heels of truth, that falls so miserably short of--well, of one's ambitions for truth, precisely; one's experience of--

(catches the SCRIBE looking at him)

But the Feast of Succah is still some months distant. Suppose we leave the shorebird to circle in peace yet awhile.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

There is in our town a great and respected responsa-writer. There is also an elderly rabbi, not quite right in the head, but still fancying himself a much sought-after decisor. Occasionally, as something between a joke and a kindness, the yeshiva lads will send him over a query to rule on--actually some long since settled question--which the old man labors furiously to "resolve"; and in this manner, he has acquired the nickname of "the Great Decisor." Now recently a courier from a far land arrived in town with a question for the distinguished responsa-writer. Not being familiar with the nickname of the elderly rabbi, the courier asked to be brought before "the great decisor"--and was promptly shown into the presence of the doddering rabbi, to whom he stated his case. Now, by what miracle I know not, the old man came back with a responsum of such clarity and depth

that no better answer can be imagined. The problem we now face is: may a response obtained in this manner be taken as valid; and if so, must we now reinstate the old scholar in his former honors and dignity?

~~(pause)~~ (pause) — don't read out loud

RABBI

You read no salutation....

SCRIBE

~~(turns the scroll over)~~

It is addressed ~~only~~ to "the Great Decisor."

~~(The eyes of the RABBI and the SCRIBE meet. The SCRIBE sets the scroll aside, opens another scroll, and reads:)~~

From Rabbi Emek Halacha of New York:

Tongue of the Law! Your luminous pronouncements are the talk of the whole Jewish world. But the actual writings upon which your fame rests--the great series of responsa on disinterment, on the use of embroidered materials as ritual coverings, on chance-enkindled sparks, and the rest--are known to us only from digests and summaries. May we allow ourselves to hope that you will one day bring out all your responses in a book?

RABBI

It is not "bringing out" that tempts us, but... silence. To be at a loss; to stand--mouth hanging open, thoughts coming back and back, absolutely in the dark what to reply.... But yet a silence with nothing of refusal about it. Not a silence that withholds, but silence that holds....

~~(Pause. The SCRIBE looks up.)~~

Publication does not figure among ~~our~~ plans at present. The majority of the scholarly world are wiser than ~~we~~; and as for the small minority who are not--why labor on behalf of a small minority?

SCRIBE

~~(opens another scroll and reads:)~~

From Rabbi Yosef Dov of Brisk, Lithuania:

Exemptor, exempt us! It is ordained that in every study-house a one-cubit-square section of wall be left unplastered, in memory of the destruction of the Temple. But here, in this Baltic harbor-town, where a salt and raging wind finds its way through the least crack or cranny--

RABBI

If thou thinkest the salt gusts of memory so easily walled out, take up thy trowel!

SCRIBE

~~(opens another scroll and reads:)~~

From Rabbi Leon da Modina of Venice:

Star of the Exile! What answer shall be made to those innovators who seek to replace the traditional synagogue chanting with complex choral arrangements for mixed voices?

RABBI

But are we here in the presence of an innovation? What is the public worship already but just such a coming together of a voice that cries and a voice that cries. Thousands of voices on an empty beach....

(The SCRIBE looks up, puzzled; waits a moment... then opens another scroll and reads:)

} cut

SCRIBE

From Rabbi Abraham Gombiner, Utrecht, Holland:

Resolver, resolve us! Tradition holds that the Torah was dictated word for word to Moses by the Holy One Himself. Yet recent scholarly methods reveal the presence of all sorts of splicings, inserts and variants in the Sacred Text. How, in the light of such findings, is it possible to go on maintaining--?

RABBI

If He has dictated all, He has dictated the presence of these disparities, though we may be as little able to account for them as for thousands of voices on an empty beach.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

O thou Venturer-~~past the bounds~~^{Past the Bounds:} I, Yakhel, student, having mastered both Talmuds with the principal Tosefta and commentaries, now seek permission to study the so-called "external writings" of Buffon, Lyell and Darwin, on the grounds that from Nature, too, the Voice may go forth--

RABBI

The beachgrass moves as within breath, but this is not the wind speaking. The sea gives of its motion, but it is not the sea gives forth. Nothing in nature! Nowhere on the scene!
Who speaks--and to whom?

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Moses Schick, Rector of the Berlin Rabbinical Academy:
Resolver, resolve us! The Fathers liken Heaven to a Talmud School, where God binds on the phylacteries and leads the Redeemed in study. Yet elsewhere we read: "His ways are ways of quietness." Now, if Talmud classes here at the Berlin Rabbinische Hauptschul are any guide, "quietness" is about the last thing--

RABBI

And with that, the beach was still. It was not a falling silent, still less a silencing of. But it was of the nature... of a moment... when suddenly voices draw all one way....

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Samuel di Medina of Constantinople:
Teacher! In the western wall of our synagogue we have a stained glass window on which the unpronounceable Holy Name of God is inscribed. Each evening at sunset the window is ~~lit up by the last gleams of light coming in off the Bosphorus.~~ lit up by the last gleams of light coming in off the Bosphorus. The question is whether the sudden standing forth of these irradiated letters may not constitute a forbidden "speaking" of the Holy Name.

RABBI

What is speech and when is silence? Struggling to be still in the only fashion they know, they cry out after stillness, they voice their struggle... each question silenced by an answer, each answer silent at the thought of all that must only now--

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Meyer the Preoccupied, Lublin, Poland:
Searcher of them that search! When Jacob wrestled with the angel--was that a dream, or did it really happen?

RABBI

The distinction is a dream, and in vain we wrestle with it.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

cut

From Rabbi Yakob Emden, Hamburg-Altona and suburbs:

Tongue of the Mishnah! Some wealthy merchants of this town wish to sponsor an expedition to go in search of the site of the Garden of Eden. Can you offer any guidance as to a route by which--

RABBI

Through fields of voice, past groves of voice, in the coverts of a tone-- The voices are places--yet not such places as the beach where all this while I have never once ceased to--

SCRIBE

(forgetting himself and not reading for the first time in the play:)

cut
DU

What were you doing on this beach?

(The RABBI looks right through him, goes on performing "The Searching Hand gesture.")

The SCRIBE, realizing his gaffe, quickly tears open another scroll and reads:)

~~scribble~~

From Rabbi Melammed Feinschnitt, Coral Gables, Florida:

Star of the Exile! Does the wearing of a self-winding watch on Shabbos violate the prohibition against laboring with one's hands on the day of--?

RABBI

What was I doing on the beach--what am I ever doing?

Pondering a question! Namely: Jade from the sky, fallen to earth in a meteor--might this be gathered up and put to all the same uses as earthly jade? However, they'd...neglected to send along a sample of the meteoritic rock. So--this being the time of year when meteor showers are frequent in our latitudes--I took myself out onto the beach under the stars to see if I might obtain some jade from on high.

(The SCRIBE has a moment of indecision--but then reaches for another scroll:)

SCRIBE

From Rabbi Isaac Schmelkes, Posen, Germany:

Fount of the Law! What are the rules governing use of body-tissue from trayf animals in organ transplant operations on Jewish--?

RABBI

Not that the composition of the mineral itself was ever really in question: the characteristic streak-patterns of low-grade jadeite were (they wrote) clearly visible; color, density, mass--all pointed to jade....

SCRIBE

(doggedly going on; ~~opens another scroll and reads:~~)

From Rabbi L'Cha Shelomo of Casablanca:

Decisor, decide us! A woman deeds all she has to the poor, on condition that she may but once more look upon the face of her missing son. Next morning a photograph of the runaway --with gentile bride--arrives in the mail--

RABBI

No, chemically, the meteoritic substance was identical to jade that we know. But was it, so to speak, morally identical?

SCRIBE

(~~opens another scroll and reads:~~)

From Rabbi Elton-Langley-Cush, Swansea, Wales:

Tongue of the Fathers! Does the man who hears the shofar sound over the wireless thereby fulfill his obligation ~~of~~ ~~hearkening--?~~

RABBI

If identical--let them do as they liked! But if not, then even the pious use they had in mind for it--as replacement for a jade Torah-pointer that had, apparently, been stolen some time earlier by superstitious men reasoning that what had so often pointed to truth could not fail to point them ~~out~~ the way to--fortune, safety, what will you. Or was ~~missing~~ and presumed stolen by such men. Or would have been missing and presumed stolen by such men if the whole problem had not been dreamed up by the Katover Rabbinical Board as a test of my worthiness to join the company of the Respondents.

SCRIBE

F- 12

(again forgetting himself and asking a question of his own:)

How could you be so sure, just because you hadn't received a real meteor, that you hadn't received a real question?

(The RABBI does not reply. The SCRIBE presses:)

How could you be so sure, just because you hadn't received a real meteor, that you hadn't received a real question?

(Enter the COURIER with a fresh batch of mail. He is wearing the same costume as on his first entrance--only now it is luminously, unnaturally clean; and the COURIER himself seems rested and fit. As before, he dumps out a torrent of scrolls of all descriptions onto the SCRIBE's desk, exchanges his emptied pouch for the newly filled one hanging off the side of the desk, and exits.)

(The SCRIBE takes up the nearest-to-hand of this new batch of scrolls, opens, and reads:)

From Rabbi Tisnuvas ha Geonim, by the wellside, Babylon:

Master! How could you be so sure, just because you hadn't received a real--?

(The SCRIBE goes pale, drops the scroll, and looks quickly off in the direction the COURIER has exited--but the COURIER is gone. Fearfully, the SCRIBE takes up the scroll again and resumes reading in a shaky voice:)

How could you be so sure, just because you hadn't received a real meteor, that you hadn't received a real question?

(During the following response of the RABBI, the SCRIBE crosses to where the COURIER has exited, and seems to scan the distance offstage for him.)

RABBI

Oh, "how"...! But it was so clearly my views on the responsa-process itself that were being tested. I mean, meteors!, that's--what? The questions raining down on the Respondent-- or maybe: the answers flashing in on one who has long scanned the skies.... And the point at issue: how usable what has "come down" from on high? And the use! A Torah-pointer --an instrument for singling out which of all the words before us shall speak to the moment. It was all almost insultingly transparent! I mean, even if it had not then been my hour of trial--for it stood then with me as with thee now: one had attained some notice, was not infrequently cited in support. But on the key question of whether you were destined to become one of those supreme voices that silence the rest--

(The SCRIBE has his mouth open to say something --but then has a better idea. He hurries back to his desk, tears open another scroll, and reads:)

SCRIBE

The circle around Meyer of Pressburg burns till it knows:
If our master understood

(a tremor coming into his voice)

"meteorites" to be only a pretext, why, then, did he hurry forth to the beach to acquire one?

RABBI

My first instinct, you may be sure, was not to comb the beach-rubble, but to comb the responsa-literature.

(The SCRIBE starts to reach for a scroll, but at the last moment pulls back his hand, very deliberately guides it to another part of the desk, and chooses a different one. He shakes open this latter scroll--which proves to be an exceptionally long one--and reads:)

SCRIBE

The Congregations of Asia rise in dismay: Surely our teacher does not mean to imply that on

(a catch coming into his voice)

meteorites or any other topic, the responsa-literature ...
pointed no path?

RABBI

The only direct treatment I could find was a reference to a certain scholar who mistook a glow on the horizon for a meteorite, and so missed an appearance of the Angel Metatron. In analogies, on the other hand--in all manner of crashing-in-out-of-the-blue situations--the literature abounds: the ram suddenly beneath Abraham's knife, the soldiers suddenly upon the kneeling congregation, the sense suddenly there for the puzzling scholar.... And in each case, one... grasped the connection, but was not oneself grasped.

(The SCRIBE opens another scroll which, when unfurled, turns out to be a Möbius strip, takes it on his hands like a skein of wool, brings it up over his head, and reads around the loop from inside:)

SCRIBE

But a single question forming in every heart, running from tongue to tongue: Where do we go when the Sacred Writings themselves hold out no hope?

RABBI

I went to the other extreme: that is, to all that was most distinctively meteoric in the situation. Considerations like: Had the burning stone made an impact, or slipped in unnoticed? Fallen on fertile soil or neutral ground? Gone off in a hundred directions or kept to itself? How many midnights did I lavish upon the arc of descent alone--straight down would mean..., whereas broken or sinuous would imply... --before it finally dawned on me there could be only one real measure of continuity between jade of this world and jade above: Was it still aglow when found? Still aglow, it still made part of the heavens whence it came. But "cooled down" was down: it had joined us where we are; one was no more than seizing on one's own. All right: the meteor in the query had come to hand some twenty minutes after being observed to touch earth. Is a meteor still aglow after twenty minutes? It was the latter weeks of Nisan --one of those seasons when our earth passes through meteor showers; and lifting my eyes to heaven from the page, I saw stars even now leaving their places in the night: one had only to come out under a sky already woven through with departures, and wait for the answer to drop at one's feet. So, making fast my study door, I set forth for the sea at the end of the city.

Now, arrived at the waves--

(From here on the SCRIBE no longer bothers to transcribe the RABBI's answers.)

SCRIBE

~~(tears open another scroll and reads:)~~

Master! Wait! Help us across! What comes between the synagogue and the sea?

RABBI

I saw a woman beating on a wall. ~~_____~~
 I saw an uncast shadow. I saw a possible interpretation of the Tannaitic parable of the four saints in the orchard. I see something bearing down at me over a bridge: Would those be wings? In a skirt? That music, where...? But it is only the envoy of the Katover Rabbinical Board, come for his reply. I shrank back under an archway of the old quarter to escape his gaze, and when I came forward, it was into another experience. Not that for one moment I ever ceased to round corners and thread lanes; but somehow my motion had become the motion of an eye over text. I was as if reading my way to the sea. Or--no: not reading. Getting across that tangle of blank squares with dark passages coming off them that we call the "Scribes' Quarter" was like

(The Search" here seems to lose itself in a maze.)

what moving over a page would be like if the eye were permitted every sort of a traverse but to read.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

Yes, the twists and turns of these old sections--it is all very much as you-- And yet this cannot have been the first time, nor yet the thousandth, that you attempted a passage....

RABBI

Ah, it is one thing to know

("The Search" here becoming discontinuous, jumpy)) cut

the way here, the way there. But ~~_____~~
~~_____~~ this is a "page" at every moment scribbling itself out before: the passages one penetrates fall across each other like shadows--to start off down one is already to find oneself thick in the midst of the next; any line one pursues strikes through other lines, themselves only so much striking through of strikings through; the site blackens with utterance--it is as if the way of every pen in a hand lay through this place--until, is there still such a thing in the world as a clear part, an open space, sea, my destination, keeping always before, like a memory that will neither be found nor cease from its assurances....

And then I heard the Roar.

(Something seems to catch the SCRIBE's ear; he strains in the direction of the "sound.")

From here till noted, the SCRIBE gives each scroll he opens only the barest summarizing glance before coming out with a question.)

Do I want to say "Roar," does that even really begin...?
Voices. Raised in.... Forming to...a....

SCRIBE
(his straining after the right words seeming also
a straining to hear)

Outcry?

RABBI

No.

SCRIBE

Tumult?

RABBI

No....

SCRIBE

Susurrations?

RABBI

Please....

SCRIBE

~~Point~~ Point us in a direction, something...!

RABBI

It was like the sound of word spreading through a railway
concourse that a girl lies on the tracks. It was like ~~the~~
the moaning of a hill-tribe as the eclipse deepens.
Anything you might make of the sound, sounds there.

(From here till noted, the SCRIBE no longer bothers to open scrolls, but, like a "mentalist" getting the contents of an envelope by telepathy, simply holds each unopened scroll to his temple and, after a moment, comes out with a question.)

SCRIBE

Listen, did I just--? Wait a moment, that couldn't have been--?

RABBI

I give myself over into the power of that sound. I hear and follow.

SCRIBE

What possible sound--?

RABBI

And from that moment, every time my way took a turn for the thunder, my way was clarified; some more of the tangle dropped away; corners straightened as turned; alleys that had given up all thought of ~~an~~ outcome shot forth and held, and--

And it was the sea! This is salt that I breathe, sand that I tread--

SCRIBE

Wait! I've got it! The meteor is down. And this "Roar"... is the sound of voices of the crowd that has formed.

RABBI

There was no meteor.

SCRIBE

Perhaps the wind...

RABBI

I had a moment of thinking so.

SCRIBE

Perhaps the sea...

RABBI

The sea lies stunned and bare.

Nothing in nature! Nowhere on the scene! The Roar was not arising "from," it simply arose. And as this grew clearer to me, the sound itself now begins to clarify and part, and individual voices to come forward: "Resolver, resolve us"... "According to Tractate Horyahoth"... "Master, in great perplexity we turn"....

~~.....~~
But it was only when I heard a voice in Syriac pronounce the solution to the so-called Unanswerable Paradox of the "floating tower," that what I am in the presence of suddenly broke upon me. It was the total responsa-process--the texts of all times and every land--present in a moment: Amoraim and Tannaim, queriers and queried, Toseftists and commentators--from the well-sides of Babylon to the rabbinical courts

of Henry Street. All voices speaking all questions ever asked or to be asked, and every answer ever once given or possible to give.

(The SCRIBE here takes up a single scroll which, in asking the next three questions, he unconsciously brandishes in gestures of probing, pinpointing, brushing aside, etc.)

SCRIBE

But--all these voices--many long since, others not yet-- now came they all, here on a day, together to this one--?

RABBI

Nothing "came" to anything. I stood... where it is always roaring.

I might not have my meteorite, but I had my solution. For if I was destined to a place among the Respondents, then-- I was there, too: my voice made one of the thunder; somewhere amid the speaking my answer spoke. It was all a question... of finding one's voice.

SCRIBE

I'm lost again. How could you possibly arrive at a voice amid all that--?

RABBI

To arrive at a voice, it seemed, one had only to keep on in the certainty it was already speaking. To find my voice was to find my way to the place in the din where my words forever sounded: to go out upon the Roar.

SCRIBE

Master, where are we? Even the first step.... It is all so....

RABBI

I shut my eyes to the sea, and immediately I am upon that other sea--which, however, does not long remain "sea" or any one thing, but changes as ventured upon: now a surface with something working the contours from below (and it comes up here, and it comes up here); now a pattern of highlights coming forward

on metal as the metal turns in the light; now brushed velvet; now basalt; now something to which nothing visible could correspond; and I am lost not so much in space as for want of it. The places are voices--come at by ways that are also voices: past fields of voice, through groves of voice, in the coverts of a tone: send forth the ear! For all seeking is hearkening in a landscape all voice. And to choose path is to choose to hearken to this tongue sooner than that. And then all ~~at~~ once I knew myself near. No covert had disclosed a meteor; of jade the groves are barren; to a pointer nothing points. Yet something is by, trembling forward upon itself, and--

And the Roar... entered me. I... took it all in, where to this day it moves, it sounds, it roars me from within.

SCRIBE

Ah, Master, you are not going to ~~bring me it was...~~ ^{tell me it was...}

(opens his hand and lets the scroll he has been flourishing drop into the pouch)

all in the mind...?

RABBI

Not in the mind, but of the mind: the stir of the process, the mind's own roar.

Just

(From now until he runs out of scrolls
(just after the second question on page 23),
the SCRIBE, with each question he asks, sweeps
two or three more unread scrolls directly off
the desktop into the pouch. The gesture has the
character of a compulsive "clearing the decks.")

SCRIBE

Father, we sit among fragments. You first identify this
... buzz you caught with the commingled voices of centuries.
Now you give it out to be some wholly internal process of--

RABBI

But it is both!--and is not fully understood as either till
grasped as both. I now experienced the range of the
responsa-literature as the range of my own responsiveness;
the Possible roared forth its claim to be my possibilities.
And with that--

(brings "The Search" to a dead halt in air)

SCRIBE

Silence.

RABBI

As if to hear the Roar for what it is, checks it. For out of what
could that Roar have gathered but as murmurings against--
silence. All that clamor only the sound of voices struggling
to be still in the one way they know: they cry out after
stillness, they voice their struggle--till at length the
speaking draws all one way, each question silenced by its
answer, every answer silent at the thought of all that is
still to come.

SCRIBE

Take us into this silence. Do more. Make us hear
this silence.

RABBI

It was not a mere failing silent, still less a silencing of, but it was of the nature of a silence that goes back before: silence more absolute than that of Scripture on its own interpolations; more inward than a dream repented in a dream; more profound than the frustration of him who has no tongue but the Grecian in which to hail the angelic radiance at the door. Silence more marked than the Succah-booth which a shorebird circles and circles; more promising than the hush that falls when a rabbi, long unregarded, is suddenly heard speaking truth once more. Nothing was asked of me. I asked nothing. I was... without question.

SCRIBE

But what of the question that brought us where we now-- the meteorite, the Torah-pointer?

RABBI

Is it possible you've not--? The silence... was in response.

SCRIBE

So, then: jade from the sky--one keeps it, one doesn't keep it?

RABBI

One keeps silent.

(The SCRIBE's desk is now swept bare of scrolls.) *cut*

SCRIBE

All this way and no answer!

RABBI

The silence "answered." It was, I now saw, nothing but this very silence that I must maintain before the Katover Rabbinical Board; by a silence convey what had been by silence conveyed to me: that what falls in from on high one can only fall silent before, advancing never to a yea or nay, but advancing in questions.

And with that, the din broke forth anew, "

(He resumes ~~the "searching hand gesture."~~ The SCRIBE presses his hands to his ears.)

louder than before--and from that hour has never for a moment ceased to roar in my ears, like the sea inside one of those shells lying about the beach where, now, opening my eyes, I find I have never ceased to stand.

SCRIBE

(~~his hands pressed to his ears~~)

How do you bear it?

RABBI

It is my thought--how should I not bear it? And then, what is all my skill and fame as a decisor but this access continuing, this returned Roar, over which, set in motion by questions,

("The Search" here becoming open and billowy)

I go, I range, I send forth the ear!

SCRIBE

(~~his hands still over his ears~~)

Can't you make it stop? Make it stop!

RABBI

For that, there would have to come a question that sent me back....

SCRIBE :

"Back...?"

RABBI

To the place in the Roar where the silence is: the grove of silence in the fields of voice. Back to the voice... that speaks silence, that voices silence--

(The SCRIBE removes his hands from his ears.)

SCRIBE

(~~removing his hands from his ears~~)

What question...?

(Enter the COURIER. This time he is wearing a white robe. Stray details from his earlier costumes--a fringed boot here, a purple hat-feather there--reappear as design-motifs on the pure white field of the robe, as if dropping down through white space.... He is bathed in a blue-green light emanating from his pouch.)

As on his earlier entrances, the COURIER starts to empty out his pouch onto the SCRIBE's desk --but the SCRIBE blocks the gesture.)

SCRIBE

What's going on here? Who are you?

(The SCRIBE reaches down into the COURIER's pouch and draws forth a small spherical meteorite, pockmarked like the moon and giving off a blue-green glow.)

I thought all this about the meteor was settled long ago. Wait a minute:

(holds out meteorite accusingly toward the RABBI)

didn't you say there never was any--? that it was all--?

(turns back to COURIER)

So now how do you come to be in possession of--

(drops the meteorite back in COURIER's pouch)] cut

well, or for that matter, of any of what you bring up out of that--? Letters from all over the Diaspora and every period since Antiquity; questions that make the next turn in a conversation not yet dreamt of at the moment of their--?

(protectively snatching the filled pouch off the desk-peg and clutching it to him:)] cut

You steal those bags of inquiries, don't you? But then-- from whom? And how did he--? Or maybe... you're just out there in the next room, tossing them off...? How can you misuse the responsa-process like this?

(looks at the pouch in his hands)] cut

Or maybe... this is the responsa-process? What are we doing with a responsa-process, anyway? Other religious and legal systems manage without--why not us? Say for a moment we didn't have one:

how would the issues now thrashed out in responsa-exchanges then get resolved? Even as it is, must there not be all sorts of questions that cannot even be framed within the responsa-format--or even, that pose a threat to it?

(An offstage recorded voice is heard, deafening for an instant, then at once fading to near-inaudibility. Though at first too loud and then too low for many words to be made out, the voice on the tape is recognizably that of the SCRIBE, taking from the top ["What's going on here?", page 25] the barrage of questions which the SCRIBE himself is now well embarked on.)

The SCRIBE gives no indication of having heard the offstage voice. The RABBI, however, cocks his ear, instinctive as an animal. As the recorded voice continues, he sends his hand out after it in the searching gesture. ~~the searching~~ that is, he lets his rigid, vertically held palm "dowse" for the source of the sound, by means of a series of sharp, corner-turning movements in air.)

What is an example of such a question? What is a question? What is to ask a question--and when has one been? Are demands questions? Is a dissatisfaction or uncertainty a question already? Where do rhetorical questions fit in? What is the resonance that seems to lurk in the most casual questions, as, "How came you by that piece of tin on your nightstand?" or, "Who was that at the door?"? The whole nature of the interrogative is to make someone else do my seeking for me--what do you say? Are you prepared to maintain a distinction between asking for help, asking for an explanation, and asking for it? What, as you see it, is the common ground between responding to treatment, responding to a challenge, and responding to questions?

(A second tape of the SCRIBE's voice starting the question-barrage from the top comes on under the first (which continues). [As before, the volume-level is at first deafening, then, almost at once subsides to near-inaudibility.]

The RABBI's head flicks instinctively in the direction of this new sound. [His exploratory, "dowsing" hand sharply turns another corner in air and takes out after the new voice.]

Say you have gone and put my motives in question--where have you put them? If I would call into question a person, value or thing, who do I call? In the case of the "burning questions" of the day --where's the fire? "The question has been raised"--I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask: above what, then? Is to raise a question the same thing as to ask one? Or may I raise the question I do not ask--even, perhaps raise it by not asking it?

What kind of situation is a questioning-situation really trying to be? Suppose one had to do everything ~~with~~ with questions--what could one do? Can a question create? Exhaust? Undo? Affirm?

(Simultaneously, six or eight more recorded versions of the SCRIBE's voice come on under the first two (which continue), each picking up the question-barrage at a different point. cut

The RABBI leaves off motioning with his hand, rises, and begins to move over the stage. He makes his way into the sound, pursuing now with his whole body the course of sudden right-angle turns which formerly his hand alone had described in the air.)


Are questions knowledge? Is there a question that, answered in full, might eliminate the need for all further questions? (Was that it?) Or is the questioner himself a question more profound than any he can pose? And if so, what does his question ask of me?

(Hundreds, thousands, of offstage recorded voices now come on: the roar of an enormous crowd. Occasionally, some phrase or fragment from an earlier moment in the SCRIBE's question-barrage detaches itself and is heard above the Roar for an instant.] cut

The RABBI continues to make his way over the stage, "going out upon the Roar." His movements suggest that the character of the space through which he advances is constantly changing: now a bog, now a maze of girders, now a stone stairway, now a windy ledge, (etc.)]

What is the question I am all this while moving toward; to which all my asking may be just so much asking-the-way; the question I can ask and then stop?

(founding afresh on the COURIER) cut

And you--have you not all this while been building to a question of your own? All this trafficking in the queries of others... what is your question--and why don't you ask it? Or perhaps... you have asked it? Was that yours--the one about prophetic voices and empty chairs? or the hole in the study-house wall? or choral singing and solo chant? 

No. What do you care about prophets or plaster or polyphony?

(scoops a handful of scrolls out of the pouch)

What is your question?

(lets the scrolls drop back into the pouch)

Or is it... your intrusions themselves that pose the question?

(turning to RABBI)

Where does he come from? Whose courier? Is he the same who brought you that first--? But then why a real meteor this time? Why a "this time"? Master, in great perplexity I turn: doesn't anything about all this raise a question in your mind? Resolver, resolve me: how is it I'm the one asking all the questions? Star of the Exile: what can you possibly be hoping to gain by this silence of yours?

(The RABBI emerges from a final, constricting stretch--a pipeline or crawlspace--and is directly before the COURIER.)

Why don't you ask something?

(The SCRIBE flings down the pouch he is carrying in the direction of the RABBI. Scrolls roll all over the stage-floor, eddying about the feet of RABBI and COURIER.)

Ask something!

(The RABBI straightens up--and is face-to-face with the COURIER. His eyes and those of the COURIER meet. It is the first time the RABBI has acknowledged the COURIER's presence.)

RABBI

(looking the COURIER steadily in the eyes)

I ask... nothing.

SCRIBE

(in exasperation)

Voice of the voices! Do you know, you are, without question--

RABBI

(continuing to look straight in the
COURIER's eyes:)

I am... without question.

(The COURIER returns the RABBI's steady gaze. The glow from the meteorite in the COURIER's pouch isolates RABBI and COURIER in blue-green light.

The roar of voices goes to a dissonant musical chord for a moment; then to a unison tone for an even briefer moment; then to silence.

One beat of silence; then blackout.

In the darkness before the lights come up: the slosh of waves hitting a beach, the cry of a shorebird....

Lights quickly up.)

END